The sun rises. I see the world grow brighter around me as day crosses the threshold. The greatest surprise is that I'm not tired. Perhaps I'm still running on pure adrenaline or perhaps I'm just so enthralled with the moment that exhaustion doesn't even cross my mind. In either case it's time to start a new day, one that will surely prove to be difficult.

I'm hungry. Cassie is hungry. We are in the middle of nowhere. I see that the squirrels have gotten an early start to the day and still fantasize about catching them. Even if it weren't difficult to hunt them down, I'm not hungry enough to debate eating raw meat. I let Cassie continue her blissful slumber as I scour the nearby area for more berries that I recognize or anything edible. She's awake long before I return defeated.

She doesn't have to say anything. I know how hungry she is. She clutches her stomach and looks on in pain. This kind of hunger is unfamiliar to her, but she finds it more unfriendly than I do. I don't want to prod her to move, but staying here isn't getting us any closer to food or survival.

The knives rolling about my stomach is the only thought that crosses my blistered mind. The daggers stabbed holes in my stomach is the only feeling that wracks my body. It roars over the pain of my feet rubbing against shoes that have long-since worn out. It roars over the true serenity that this forest should bring. It even roars over Cassie.

Guilt is a strange beast. You can prick and puncture it with spears of forgiveness, swords of truth, or even arrows of compassion but the monster will never truly die, not for long anyway. It consumes the human mind and lets you know how badly you screwed up. The world may forgive you for your mistake, but it will never let you forgive yourself—not until you've fixed the problem, not until you've made everything alright again.

Fixing the problem isn't easy as we walk about the forest labyrinth. I have no idea where we are, how long we've been walking, or even what it matters. I'm almost ready to eat my jacket by the time I decide we need to stop. Fatigue and hunger are locked in mortal combat. One wants me to go, and one wants me to stay. I try to bring a treaty between the two of them by sitting down and scanning the many tunnels that the maze of trees has to offer.

It's all moss and bark. Not one of these infinite trees bears a goddamn fruit. My hunger barks angrily. I look harder, trying to force some sort of food into being with willpower alone, but the trees stay as barren as they had been before my attempts at nonsense.

I struggle to my feet. Cassie isn't moving. She's just staring at a snail slinking along a rock as if the being entrances her. I take another look and she scoops the creature into her mouth and is trying to bite through its shell as it wriggles and writhes. I would be lying if I said that it didn't seem remotely appetizing, though I still have some semblance of wits about me. I scan the trees once again, this time from a higher vantage points.

Then I see them: specks of red like rubies in the rough. I stride over to it, barely holding my own weight with my walking stick. I must be having some sort of delusion: a tree dressed in apples. I look to the ground surrounding it and see one loose fruit marred by mush and infested with worms and other insects. This isn't my imagination playing another game. This is real.

I call Cassie over as I pick an apple off of the tree and roll it in my hand. The feeling of food is so surreal to me. I take a bite and am onset by a surge of flavor. My mind returns to clarity as I realize how incredibly sour these fruits are. Crab-apples. I actually don't care, and judging by how vigorously Cassie is devouring apple after apple she doesn't care either. The tree has enough mana from the gods to revitalize us, for now. I'd like to say that there would be enough fruit within us to sate our hunger for weeks to come, but we can't stay here.

The forest isn't friendly. I've already been scraped against its ridged and ferocious teeth, and it has yet to bite. We didn't freeze last night, but now that I have my mind back I can see gray clouds gathering from up above. It's going to rain soon, and that will make staying warm impossible. Today is already much colder than yesterday.

I fill up Cassie's backpack with as many spare apples as it could reasonably hold, and I even offer to carry it myself. She happily agrees, and I begin to wonder if she's a bit miffed at me for letting her go hungry for this long. Her face betrays no

emotion other than sheer satisfaction. It could be that the beast of hunger is dead, or that the one who unleashed it has been properly punished.

It's not really important right now. What is important is finding out of the forest. Finding our way back to the river might be our best bet, but that runs the risk of us going in circles. The only option that doesn't have us wandering endlessly is just walking in a straight line and hope that that's the quickest way out of the forest. It may be, or it may go on for hundreds of miles, but it's a gamble that we are forced to take.

Eventually we come to a clearing. A meadow with waist-high grass is spread out before us, and I'm beset by a horrid chill. Above us I see blacks and grays convulse in terrifying patterns. A bolt of lightning strikes a distant mountain. The first few drops of the upcoming storm already grace the bear parts of my chest, causing sprinklings of pain. We need to move; now.

I grab Cassie's hand and break into a run. I'm not sure to where, but we can't stay here. I may not be the world's best outdoorsman, but I know that walking out in a lightning storm is not a good idea. Cassie trips up as we are shrouded in a downpour. I hear a boon of thunder and a flash of lightning echoes across Cassie's face.

I pick Cassie up, swimming in distilled fear. I try to explain the gravity of the situation, but my voice is lost in the howling wind and pelting rain. Instead, I try to send her the message that we are in a dangerous situation and need to get out of it immediately. I lift her onto my back and start charging across the meadow.

The immense weight I am carrying doesn't help me in the slightest, neither does the turbine that surrounds us. I briefly look to my right hand, the one that holds Cassie's backpack. I actually debate dropping the damn thing, but I instead settle for shouting to Cassie to grab it. It feels like it's going to tear my arm off, and she can't hear me over this storm.

We break back into the forest where the wind and the rain becomes less of a problem. They're still there, but Cassie can at least hear me now. She takes the backpack and straps it on as I make my way, stomping over tree routes and looking

for anything that can be used for shelter. Saying that I have become winded would be a gross understatement. My lungs have become a fiery forge forcing metal to bend with the power of heat. The rain that gets through the treetops still pelts my face and my chest, and the wind seems to be anywhere but at my back. Still I run.

I cringe every time I hear a barrage of thunder. The forest lights up in a veil of white, and I trip over a root. Cassie goes flying off of my back and rolls down the way over the horizon of a hill. I clamber to my feet and dash in to pick her back up, but to my surprise I see that she's hanging onto the branch of a bush over a very steep plummet. I throw my hand out to grab her, but she's too far out of reach. If I bent down any farther I would stumble over the hill and we'd both fall to the bottom, which could be who-knows-where.

I hear the branch crack. It can't hold the weight of Cassie. Then I notice her backpack.

"Cassie, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, what do I do? I—I'm scared Mr. Wright."

"You have to get rid of your backpack, it's weighing down the branch too much."

"But our food—"

The branch cracks again.

"I'd have to let go to get the backpack off," Cassie says, looking at the straps of it.

I try to reach for Cassie again. It's no use. As I get back up the letter opener falls out of my pocket. Please be sharp enough, I silently pray as I pick it up and hand it to Cassie. She reaches for it and misses. Another crack and Cassie falls further from

me. Think goddamn it, think! There has to be a way to get her out of here, there has to be. The branch is hanging on with only a few strands of wood, and Cassie isn't doing much better. It would take too damn long to dig out a foothold to save Cassie.

Then I notice that the rain has loosened the dirt. I pray to myself. I slide over the edge and plunge the letter opener into the dirt. It slips through most of the dirt before it gets stuck on a root or a rock or something. I'm dangling just below Cassie's feet. Not my brightest idea; not by a long shot, but it does the job. There's a final snap and Cassie falls into my free arm as the branch tumbles down into the distance.

My arm holding onto the letter opener is shaking. It won't be long before either it gives out, or the root does. Disposing of some excess weight still might buy us some time. I tell Cassie once again to get rid of her backpack. She doesn't hesitate this time. She lets the strap on her free arm loose and then switches holding my arm with her other hand and does the same thing with the other strap. The backpack falls into the abyss. Apples spray out on the way down.

It's not helping. My arm is still shaking fervently. There isn't much I can do either. Both of my arms are occupied, and even if they weren't there would be nothing to grab. The hill is way too steep to even try to climb, and all it takes is another misfortune lightning strike to force me to tumble downwards with Cassie still clutching my hand.